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Resources for Teaching with Primary Source Materials

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Archival Resources on the Web

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Resources for Teaching with Primary Source Materials

by Jolie Braun, Ohio State University

Whether teaching undergraduates how to do research, leading an activity for K–12 students, or giving a talk to the general public, instruction is a key part of archival outreach and engagement. After long being seen as gatekeepers, today archivists are increasingly recognized as facilitators and as such have a responsibility to inform, educate, and inspire. This column highlights websites about archives-based instruction with the goal of helping readers discover resources that will help them create opportunities for learning and engagement.

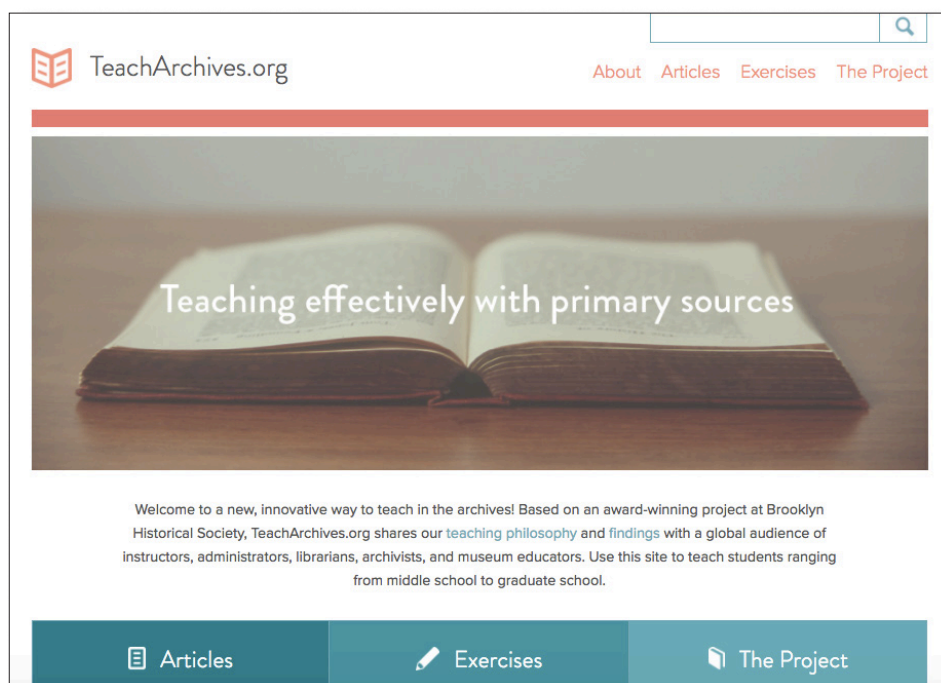
TeachArchives.org

TeachArchives.org is an essential resource for any archivist interested in teaching with primary source material. The result of the Brooklyn Historical Society's multiyear collaborative grant project, the site consists of a collection of hands-on activities intended to introduce students from middle school to graduate school to working with archival materials. Cleanly designed and easy to navigate, TeachArchives.org features more than a dozen tried and tested lesson plans, from analyzing runaway slave advertisements to studying photography formats to using

historical documents to explore ideas about garbage. A major strength of the site is the thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and flexibility of the activities. Each includes detailed information—learning objectives, a step-by-step lesson plan, end products, handouts, and digitized archival materials—making it easy to replicate or adapt. The site also offers a selection of excellent articles about teaching in an archives or special collections setting. Pieces such as “Choose Your Documents” and “What Are High-Impact Practices?” provide both practical advice and reflections on pedagogical approaches. While new content is no longer being added, the wealth of materials will keep any new visitor busy for quite a while.

TPS Exchange

Developed by archivists and special collections librarians, TPS Exchange (rb.teachwithstuff.org) aims to be an “interactive, one-stop site to find and exchange information about teaching with primary sources.” A project of SAA's Reference, Access, and Outreach Section and the Teaching with Primary Sources Committee, the site features hands-on activities for a variety of audiences, including K–12, undergraduate and graduate students, and community groups. Like TeachArchives.org, TPS Exchange's lessons include in-depth descriptions and supplementary materials. While some activities depend on specific collections or items, the strongest—such as “Primary Source Workshop” and “Exploring Artists' Books”—are highly adaptable and focus broadly on helping students develop critical, analytical, and research skills through working with primary sources. A relatively new and still growing resource, the site currently offers eight lesson plans. For those who have successful activities to share, TPS Exchange allows users to submit their own content as well.



TeachArchives.org's homepage

(Continued on page 24)

(Continued from page 23)

DocsTeach

The National Archives has an extensive collection of online educational resources, and DocsTeach: An Online Tool for Teaching with Documents (www.docsteach.org) is particularly worth highlighting for those interested in using primary source materials to teach American history and culture to a K–12 audience. The site features three major components: a digital collection of thousands of archival resources, a library of document-based activities, and an online tool that helps educators create their own activities. With more than a hundred available, DocsTeach’s exercises span the course of American history and include such topics as “Comparing Civil War Recruitment Posters,” “Analyzing Einstein’s Citizenship Application,” and “Challenger Explosion Photograph Analysis.” Users may search by grade level, historical era, skill developed (such as historical analysis or historical research), or activity type. While TeachArchives.org and TPS Exchange focus on hands-on activities in an archives or special collections setting, DocsTeach is geared toward classroom learning. As the exercises are built around high-resolution images of primary source materials, this resource is ideal for those

who do not have easy or direct access to archival documents. Students studying the civil rights movement, for example, can explore Rosa Parks’s arrest record, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and materials documenting Bloody Sunday regardless of their location. The “Online Tools” portion of the site is a unique and especially exciting feature allowing users to create and customize their own teaching activities by guiding them through a series of questions about lesson topic, goals and objectives, and desired primary source materials.

Primary Source Sets

Created by educators, the Digital Public Library of America’s Primary Source Sets (dp.la/primary-source-sets) are “designed to help students develop critical thinking skills by exploring topics in history, literature, and culture through primary sources.” Arranged thematically, each set features approximately a dozen digitized primary source artifacts from libraries, archives, and museums across the United States. With more than a hundred sets, the site boasts a wide range of topics, including “Creating the Constitution,” “The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston,” “The Post-War Rise of the Suburbs,” “Negro

The National Archives’ DocsTeach site includes a tool that allows users to create and customize their own teaching activities.

League Baseball,” and “ACT UP and the AIDS Crisis.” Because the sets contain a variety of material types, this site is an excellent way to help students discover that archival materials are not only documents, they can also be audiovisual items, such as a news footage clip of an Equal Rights Amendment rally or an excerpt of an oral history about school desegregation. A teaching guide accompanies each set, including discussion questions and suggested activities. Targeted at K–12 teachers and college instructors, DPLA’s project also will be useful to archivists working with students, teachers, or groups interested in learning about American history, literature, and culture.

Using Primary Sources

Like DocsTeach and the DPLA’s Primary Source Sets, the Library of Congress’s Using Primary Sources (www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources) is aimed at educators interested in teaching American history and culture to K–12 students using primary source materials. Much of the content, however, can be adapted for a variety of contexts, collections, and audiences, and would be valuable to any archivists who teach. Of particular note is the “Primary Source Analysis Tool,” a simple but effective online worksheet that helps students observe, analyze, and document their reactions to archival materials. Users first select a primary source material format (from 10 options that include maps, photographs and prints, political cartoons, motion pictures, and newspapers) and then are asked a series of questions intended to help them explore an archival item. The manuscripts category, for example, prompts users to consider: “What do you notice about the page the writing appears on?,” “Why do you think this manuscript was made?,” and “If someone created

something like this today, what would be different?” The accompanying teacher’s guides, also arranged by format, provide activity ideas. Using Primary Sources also has sections about teaching citations and copyright, as well as a page dedicated to finding primary sources that includes links to themed digital collections, web guides, and digitized primary source materials organized by state.

The Teaching with Primary Sources Bibliography

SAA’s Reference, Access, and Outreach Section’s Teaching with Primary Sources Working Group has developed a comprehensive resource for scholarship on archives-based instruction (www.zotero.org/groups/teaching_with_primary_sources/items/collectionKey/2BKBRT8). The bibliography comprises more than a hundred scholarly articles, chapters, and books, and features “works [that] offer theoretical and practical information on using primary sources as pedagogical resources and how archivists can assist with maximizing student learning.” It can be searched by keyword and sorted alphabetically by title or author, and links to full articles available online are included where applicable.

A Few Final Suggestions

Here are a few general suggestions regarding these resources. When using one of these sites in a presentation or activity, check the links beforehand to make sure they are working. If devising a handout based on activities or lesson plans encountered through these resources, remember to cite by including a credit line at the bottom. Last, think broadly! While each of these websites has particular audiences in mind, they all offer opportunities for thinking about how to implement new content, ideas, and approaches into one’s teaching.

The Library of Congress’s “Primary Source Analysis Tool” helps students observe, analyze, and document their reactions to archival materials.